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**Eating Powerful Transgressions: (Re)Assessing the Spaces
and Ethics of Organic Food in the UK**

Michael K Goodman

Department of Geography, King's College London

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Chapter 6

Eating Powerful Transgressions: (Re)Assessing the Spaces and Ethics of Organic Food in the UK¹

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Michael K. Goodman

Recent scholarship has begun to assess, explore and critically engage with so-called “ethical foodscapes” (Goodman et al 2010; see also Jackson et al 2009). Often mired in the ‘moral turn’—which has now already been cast as the ‘post-moral turn’ (Barnett et al 2011)—of geography and the wider social sciences, the moral and ethical a/effects of food, and relational aspects of ‘good foods’ in particular, are coming under increasing scrutiny (e.g. Connell et al 2008). From “animals becoming food” (Meile and Evans 2010), to the “ethical complexes” of food activists and the media (Freidberg 2004), to the diverse cultures of ethical food consumption (Beagan et al 2010), to the politics of care in “reconnecting” alternative food networks (Kneafsey et al 2009; Cox et al 2013), work is beginning to explore numerous fascinating aspects of the fundamentally embedded moral/ethical *essentialism* of food as well as the ways that food is *being* embedded with moral/ethical meanings and materialities. Over the last two decades, organic foods in particular have been given this treatment through a number of different theoretical and disciplinary lenses (e.g. James 1993; Guthman 2002, 2003; Kaltoft 1999; Lockie 2002; Lockie et al 2002; Seyfang 2006).

¹ I would like to heartily thank Ben Coles, Lewis Holloway, Joséé Johnston and Colin Sage fulsome and very helpful comments on earlier drafts of the paper; I am truly lucky to have such excellent colleagues willing to take the time to critically engage with my work. I did my best, but many of their excellent suggestions I simply did not have space to develop in the chapter and I hope to do this elsewhere. Thanks also to Janet Goodman for her thoughts on the paper and especially my portrayals of our family’s organic eating habits. The SOAS London Food Writers’ Workshop thoroughly chewed this chapter over in one of the most intellectually supportive and encouraging of environments I have been party to; specific thanks to Harry West, Anne Murcott, Jakob Klein, Emma-Jayne Abbots, Lizzie Hull, Julie Botticello and Sami Zubaida. And, yes, organic milk does taste better.

A recent paper by Clarke et al (2008) has been particularly crucial in developing an intervention and set of arguments in relation to what they call ‘the spaces and ethics of organic food’ in the UK. Here, based on their engagements with a number of individuals working at Riverford Organics, one of the largest organic food box delivery companies in the UK, these authors work to, as they put it,

... move beyond and ... destabilise [the] too often dichotomised ideas about organic food ... to deconstruct the perceived yawning gap between the supposedly “authentic” and ethical organic food which comes from small-scale, idyllic counter-cultural farms, and the supposedly “mainstream” and less-than-ethical organic food supposedly produced on industrial, corporate but environmentally responsible farms. (Clarke et al 2008: 221)

Subsequently, from their research, they argue that,

... in the case of Riverford, the space of organic food production and distribution is neither the small, local, counter-cultural farm nor the large, transnational, corporate firm. Rather, simultaneously, the spaces of organic food production and distribution are the national network, the regional distribution system and the local farm. In addition, in the case of Riverford, the ethics of organic food exhibit few grand designs (of environmental sustainability, for example). (Clarke et al 2008: 219)

From this, a series of generalised and generalisable arguments about the ethics of organic foods production and consumption are developed:

... the ethics of organic food are best characterised as: *ordinary*, since they relate to concerns about taste, value for money, care within the family and so on; *diverse*, since multiple practices steer the production and distribution of organic food; and *graspable*, in that both vegetables and box have material and symbolic presence for consumers. (Clarke et al 2008: 219; emphasis in original)

This chapter looks to specifically explore and question—again in the UK—these more generic assertions made by the authors (referred to hereafter as either ‘Clark et al’ or ‘the authors’) about the spaces and ethics of organic food, especially since several years

have passed since the publication of their paper but also because the authors base their generalised conclusions on research carried out with the unique entity of Riverford Organics. This will be done in the light of two different ‘lenses’ that work to come at organic food in the UK from different angles than those used in previous studies. The first lens suggests the need to pull back and contextualise the market for organic foods in the UK in the first instance; in this, how might the assertions about the spaces and ethics of organic foods made by Clarke et al be (re)assessed if it is acknowledged that the vast majority of organic foods sold in the UK are supplied to and purchased at supermarkets? Given that the majority of consumers—ethical or otherwise—‘make contact’ with organic foods in UK supermarkets now and also at the timing of the writing of their paper, there are other, and indeed more predominant, spaces and ethics of organic foods in circulation and in need of consideration when asserting their generalised spatial and moral economies.

The second lens involves ‘looking through the eyes’ of the consumers of organic foods, a perspective which Clarke et al confess they are unable to address despite their general conclusions *about* organic food consumption and consumers as related above.² In this chapter, I do this by writing my family’s engagements with organic food and organic food shopping, ‘into’ this account of organic food, food consumption and food ethics. This discussion builds on the growing trend of ‘autobiography’ in the social sciences that uses personal experiences, especially around questions of affect and ethics, as a form of data and as one more way to breakdown the subject/object dualism in academic writing that provide first-hand accounts of events, emotions and experiences

² Thus, the ‘practices’ of the spaces and ethics that Clarke et al are at pains to empirically explore here only include those of production and distribution through the lens of one food box producer without the benefit of speaking to or engaging food box or any other type of organic consumers either in person or through other published sources.

(Butz and Besio 2009; Longhurst 2011; Moss 2001; see also, e.g. Lorimer 2010; Soderstrom 2011; Warren and Berry 2009).³

Overall, this chapter looks to do its own ‘destablisation’ and/or ‘filling in’ of the arguments put forward by Clarke et al through their work with one particular organic food business/institution in the UK in the form of Riverford Organics. Using a more contextualised approach to organic foods in the UK, what I wish to do here is re-open the three intertwined questions originally put forward by Clarke et al which asks: “What do organic food networks try to do for us, and what could they do, or should they do for us?” (p. 221), and “What are the ethics of organic foods?” (p. 223). More specifically though, this chapter seeks to explore the following questions: *how*, in what *ways*, and for *whom* are the ethics of organic foods ‘ordinary’, ‘diverse’ and ‘graspable’?⁴ It is my contention here that the massive ‘transgression’ of supermarkets into the market for organic foods matters in substantial and multitudinous ways, not least for the ways in which we consider the spaces and ethics of organics in the UK. I also want to assert that ‘transgressions’ into the realms of the personal through autobiography is one increasingly important way of not only ‘writing ourselves in’ to food and food studies, but can render useful insights into the a/effects of (organic) food.

I continue as follows. First, I discuss the state of the market for organic foods in the UK and what this might mean for the understandings of the spaces and ethics of organic food. Second, I use my family’s own ‘spaces and ethics of organic foods’—as well as current research and statistics on organic food consumption⁵—to work to

³ This is especially in the case of work on food (e.g. Carolan 2011; Guthman 2008; Hayes-Conroy 2010; Longhurst 2011; Longhurst et al, 2009) and other commodity cultures (Cook et al 2004).

⁴ Another important question Lewis Holloway asked in reviewing this chapter was ‘what do organic foods do *to* us?’ i.e. how and in what ways do organic foods construct us and/or all us into being as consumers? Many thanks to Lewis for this theoretically knotty question that needs to be pursued elsewhere.

⁵ Other recent work on the cultures of organic food consumption and shopping include excellent interventions by Josee Johnston and her colleagues (Johnston et al 2011; Johnston and Baker 2005; Johnston and Bauman 2010;

interrogate the characteristics that Clarke et al use to describe and analyse the spaces and ethics of organic foods from their research with Riverford. In this, I seek to explore the related and/or different ways that organic foods are ordinary and graspable (or not) from our own perspective as predominantly supermarket shoppers of organic foods suggests to me the need to excavate, situate, and complicate the spaces and ethics of organic foods in the UK. I end with a series of questions for further work on the organic food market in the UK and beyond.

(Pro)Found(ly) in the Supermarket: The ‘Conventionalisation’ of UK Organic Consumption

It almost goes without saying that supermarkets have a great influence over what we eat, why and how, in addition to their powerful influence over food supply chains.

Geographers and others (e.g. Blythman 2004; Friedberg 2003; Tallontire and Vorley 2005; Wrigley 1998; Wrigley and Lowe 2007) have documented this and, in particular, the concentration of food retailing power into the hands of a few key firms at a global scale, for some time now. For example, in 2011, just four firms controlled approximately 75 percent of the market for all food in the UK with one retail firm in particular (Tesco) controlling close to 30 percent of the total food market (Grocerynews.com 2012).

What is seemingly less well known is the level of involvement and control that supermarkets have over the so-called ‘alternative food networks’ (Goodman et al 2012) of both fair trade and organic foods and goods. With the UK as the largest fair trade market in the world in 2011 (topping £1 billion in sales), Sainsbury’s is the world’s largest retailer of fair trade goods at £276 million in 2010, with hopes to get to £500

Johnston and Szabo 2011; Johnston 2008), as well as that by Bean and Sharp (2011), Chinnici et al (2002), Cicia et al (2002), Makatouni (2002) and Roe (2006).

million by 2015 (*The Independent* 2011). And as Barrientos and Smith (2007) have documented, in the form of supermarket own-label brand fair trade goods, this is having or has the potential to have profound effects on the transparency, direct-ness and power relations of fair trade networks:

Supermarket own brand Fair Trade has brought it further into the ambit of the more conventional agrofood system and potentially enhanced the power that supermarket buyers can exert within Fair Trade networks. This is compounded by an anomaly in the FLO system that allows supermarkets to use the FLO mark on their own brand products without having to become a licensee, due to the fact they outsource packing and labeling. Since supermarkets are therefore not necessarily bound by Fair Trade rules and regulations, their suppliers are potentially being exposed to the types of practices and pressures that exist in conventional production networks (103). ... [Moreover, d]irect contact between supermarket buyers and Fair Trade producers is rare. Some supermarkets actively resist relationships being developed between supermarket buyers and producers by rotating staff frequently between product sectors, which makes it difficult to take a process approach in line with the development objectives of Fair Trade producers (Barrientos and Smith 2007: 119).

More importantly for this chapter, though, the organic foods market is even more concentrated than that for fair trade goods with over 71.4% of organic food sales in the UK coming from supermarkets in 2011, with, also in 2011, over 50% of this market held by Tesco (27.1%) and Sainsbury's (23.6%) (Soil Association 2012). In addition, approximately 30% of organic food supplied and consumed in the UK is imported—a figure that has dropped from 70% from five years ago—and this is mostly of items such as bananas, coffee and tea that cannot be produced in the UK (Next Generation Food 2012; see also Raynolds, 2004). Major food conglomerates, for example, in the form of

Horizon Organic Dairy, Dean Foods and now Groupe Lactalis⁶ have made substantial headway into the UK organic dairy market—the largest sector of the organic market at almost 30% of total sales—through the acquisition of Rachel’s organic milk and yoghurt, the UK’s first certified organic dairy farm (Goodman et al 2012; Soil Association 2012).

Thus, to my mind, any sort of generalised analysis and set of arguments about organic foods need to *start* from the fact that the *predominant* spaces and ethics of organic foods in the UK are and have been thoroughly and unequivocally ‘supermarketised’ and ‘corporatised’. Moreover, the spaces and ethics of organic food production and consumption in the UK must be understood—or, at the very least, *considered*—through this lens given that the vast majority of organic farmers and eaters either sell to or get their organic foods from supermarkets. This does not negate the analysis of Clarke et al; rather, it suggests that *the majority* of the spaces and ethics of organic food in the UK—both quantitatively and qualitatively in this more contextualised perspective—are quite varied and differently practiced by the *vast majority* of organic growers and consumers in the UK than the authors’ analysis of Riverford suggests.

In a very tangible way, then, the ordinariness of the ethics of organic foods—the fact that they are about taste, value for money and care within the family (p. 219)⁷—has been and is *a function* of the increased access to and visibility of organic foods as they have moved into the spaces of and been colonised by supermarkets and corporations

⁶ This is the largest dairy products group in the world and the company that owns Danone, Sorrento, Société, Bridel, Président, and Valmont, in addition to Rachel’s Organic. It is owned by the Belgian conglomerate known as BSA International.

⁷ Interestingly, the environmental benefits of organic food production and/or any notions of care about environments are not considered as an important ordinary concern for consumers in Clarke et al’s analysis.

over the last 10 years.⁸ Supermarkets have, consequently, played a crucial role in the ‘ordinary making’ of organic foods, in terms of both ethics and spaces, in the UK. Given these developments, one of the key ordinary ethical characteristics of UK organic foods must surely be that of value creation with supermarkets as the dominant players in the organic foods market. In short, profit and capital accumulation should be considered as equally, if not more, ‘ordinary’ in organic food networks. Moreover, one of the key ordinary spaces of organic foods is not only that of global capital in the form of supermarkets and global firms, but also the spaces of the international given the fact that a continuing substantial portion of organic foods in the UK are still imported from abroad.⁹ These predominantly—and thus in my formulation here, ordinarily—supermarketised, corporatised and internationalised spaces and ethics of organic foods have consequences for growers: as we have put it in talking about the effects of the post-2008 recession on organic markets (Goodman et al 2012: 98), organic products have reportedly been “crowded out” by value-ranges and producers have been “squeezed” to accept lower prices and pay for product promotions and shelf space given that in store “...shelf space for organics is subject to supermarkets’ marketing strategy and profit targets, just as it is for any other product range”. Thus, another supermarket-related ethic rears its ‘ordinary’ head here: this is the embedded ethic of competition in tightly controlled and recession-related shrinking markets for organics; these increasingly competitive conditions, then, dictate the ways and means by which organic food markets in the UK operate and, in effect, dictates which firms, supply chains, companies and farmers then become a part of and *construct* the ordinary ethics of, as

⁸ The ‘ordinaryfication’ of organic food is not just simply because they are normal fare at supermarkets but that goods like organic milk can now be found at fast food restaurants like McDonald’s. As the Soil Association (2012) reports, all the milk in all of the tea and coffee sold at McDonald’s in the UK is organic from UK organic dairy farms, with 2011 seeing a 9% increase in demand from the company.

⁹ Indeed, more recently, even Riverford Organic imports various parts of its food box from farms it owns in France (Goodman et al 2012: 99)

Clarke et al put it, “taste, value for money, care within the family and so on” (p. 219) for the preponderance of organic consumers in the UK.

This supermarketisation of organic foods similarly qualifies the claims of the “diversity” of the ethics and indeed, spaces of organic foods as argued by the authors (p. 219).¹⁰ In short, although organic product lines themselves might be diversifying, the spaces of organic food retail are seemingly doing no such thing with 50 percent of the market in the hands of just two supermarket firms for some time now; indeed, according to the Soil Association (2012) box schemes included only 10 percent of the organic market with Abel and Cole and Riverford having by far the largest chunks of this market as noted ‘mega’ organic box suppliers. The spaces of organic food, from the perspective of the ordinary retail and shopping encounter at least, are anything *but* diverse.

The same seems to go for the “diverse ethics” that the authors argue inhabit the “... multiple practices [that] steer the production and distribution of organic food” (p. 219). I do accept that there is a diversity of ethics motivating the practices of organic foods: For Riverford it is about a great deal more than those of environmental sustainability—including, for example, pleasure and business success. Other research,¹¹

¹⁰ Diversification is one of the hallmarks of post-Fordist, neo-liberal capitalism—often used to obscure the concentration of ownership—and not necessarily progressive. Many thanks to Joseé Johnston for alerting me to this important point.

¹¹ As Clarke et al (p. 226-227) show us in their deconstruction of the marketing materials and customer newsletters of Riverford, the promotion of the reconnection and connection of customers and their food through ‘disseminated knowledge’ of the items in the food box (e.g. Rhubarb) through these materials and newsletters is done through the language of the “pleasures” of these foods; thus, for them this is about a “refetishisation” of these food items that is “desirable when the purpose is to raise political consciousness” and “move organic food into the mainstream”. Surprisingly, in conjunction with these statements in their paper, they cite my work (e.g. Goodman 2004; Bryant and Goodman 2004) as an example of writing that has argued, as they put it, that “refetishisation is *essentially* undesirable” as a way to distinguish their arguments from my own. I signal this here to say that attributing these arguments to me is a complete mis-interpretation and/or mis-representation of what I said and that, moreover, I have said absolutely nothing of the sort in the context of fair trade marketing. Rather, I have shown and argued, I thought quite clearly, that refetishisation as a process can and does work to the advantage of poor farmers (the idea of them ‘seizing the fetish’) by potentially raising the political consciousness of consumers as well as being one of the key strategies of moving it into the mainstream by making fair trade a ‘quality’ product; see Goodman (2010) for further elaboration.

has highlighted how organic production can be about care and sustainability through socio-ecological reconnections (e.g. Kneafsey et al 2009; see also Goodman and Goodman 2001), eco-modernisation and entrepreneurialism (Marsden and Smith 2005), globalised “ecological citizenship” (Seyfang 2006) or what Puig De La Bellacasa (2010) calls “alter-biopolitical interventions”. Yet, what is becoming clear is that the ethics of the practices related to organic food distribution are seemingly now not just controlled by supermarkets but, as stated above, also predominantly characterised by the ethics of competition, value generation and profit. Here, as organics have moved into the mainstream—what Johnston et al (2009) refer to as the novel “corporate-organic foodscape”—the diversity of ethics that have seemed to animate organic foods from their previous movement-oriented, grander ‘hippy’ days focused on transformation and structural changes to the food system are being ‘squeezed’ and ‘crowded’ out in the hyper-competitive and recession-fuelled environments of the ordinary spaces of the supermarket. As the Soil Association (2012: 4) put it in their latest market report on organics, there are now “[c]ontinuing cuts by nearly all the retailers in ranges and shelf space, reducing choice and availability. Some have gone in just three years from positive ‘choice editing’ (offering only organic options on some lines) to negative choice denial (offering no organic option at all)”.

Additionally, but not so surprisingly, as Johnston et al (2009) have shown in Canada, many of the more radical ‘food democracy’ discourses and images of the past are being incorporated into the tropes of supermarkets and corporate-organic foodscapes. As they have documented and argued,

Images and messages associated with place, locality, and “real” producers do seem compatible with food democracy ideals, yet become more problematic when we consider how these messages have been produced within a corporate foodscape designed to

maximize profitability through long-distance commodity chains, economies of scale, and centralized corporate control. The corporate vision necessarily sees food as a commodity, or in other words, a vehicle for the accumulation of value. (Johnston et al 2009: 525)

Thus, in regard to distribution, retailing and the cultural politics of organic foods in the UK, there is now much less material and cultural ‘airspace’ for the kinds of dichotomies of ‘small, authentic and ethical organic equals good’ versus ‘large, unethical, industrial organic equals bad’ that Clarke et al worry about destabilising.¹² Supermarkets have seemingly taken over the narrative and ‘real’ spaces of organic supply chains, and so now have the power to shape these narratives, ethics and spaces of much of the UK organic food market in their own ethical and value-generating image.

The so-called “graspability” of the spaces and ethics of organic foods also needs to be qualified in the context of the supermarketisation of organics in the UK. As the authors argue (p. 227), the graspability of the ethics of organic foods—their physical and material presence of ‘difference’ and ‘difference making’—are articulated through the practices, performances and symbolisms of the delivered food box itself and the food items on offer in the box as people prepare and eat them. This is not in dispute here for the authors’s particular case, but rather that this experiential, material and ethical graspability of organic foods is simply *not* the case, again, for the vast majority of organic food consumers in the UK. Instead, the graspability of the ethics of organic foods are not only predominantly *made* possible through the materialities and symbologies of more ‘ordinary’ and ‘everyday’ supermarket shopping, these are, by far,

¹² In many ways, the—as they put it—“too often dichotomised ideas about organic food” is an utterly straw argument that allowed them to make many of the conceptual and theoretical claims about UK organic foods that they do through their work with Riverford; indeed in much of the writing before and since the publication of the Clarke et al paper, academic writers, at least, have worked hard to point out the problems with these dichotomies, especially in their normative calculations about the scale of organic food production, and, in addition, also done so from the consumerist perspective missing from their own paper; see, amongst others, Allen et al (2003) Allen (2004), DuPuis and Goodman (2005), Goodman (2004), Goodman et al (2010), Guthman (2003), Guthman (2004), Holloway et al (2007), Illbery and Maye (2005), Johnston and Baker (2005) Johnston et al (2009) and Johnston et al (2011).

the dominate pathways to the graspable ethics and ethical actions embedded in organic foods. For instance, instead of the visible symbol of the food box and the ways that the food in the box—covered with dirt, loose in the box and perhaps un-chosen and/or unfamiliar in what they are and how they should be prepared—supermarket organics are required to be up to the same visual and quality standards of conventional items, they offer up similar or parallel choices to conventional products, and are most likely carted away and brought into the house in plastic carrier bags (or those re-usable bags supplied by the consumer). Thus, what I want to suggest here is that there is a much different kind of (ordinary?) materiality and practiced graspability at work in the majority of the spaces and ethics of organic food in the UK for the majority of organic food consumers who operate outside of box delivery schemes such as Riverford. Indeed, for many, the ethics of organics have, in a way, become even *less* material and graspable, or at least graspable in a much more spectacular and different way, through the use of online shopping and home delivery of organic foods as part and parcel of a much bigger shop and as attached to the more ordinary ways we ‘spend and get’ in the context of food. A final point to make here is that the mainstreaming of organics into supermarkets has meant that organic foods—as consumable goods—are more graspable to a larger number of different people and, in particular, different socio-economic groups in the UK over time, although this too has been effected by the recession and is substantially dominated by upper-income groups. The Soil Association (2012: 6) puts it this way:

Organic food and drink continue to have a broad appeal. Eight out of ten households (83%) bought organic products [in 2011].¹³ On average consumers bought organic products 13

¹³ Although, quite problematically, what is not relayed in the report are the differential market-sizes/-values for the different income groups, thus the by-line of “eight out of ten consumers bought organic foods in 2011” does not at all say how much each of these eight out of ten purchased over the year nor which socio-economic group they belonged to; my guess is that by value, most purchases over the year were substantially carried out those in higher income groups.

times during the year, compared to 14 times in 2010. The appeal of organic products extends across the social spectrum but a tough year economically has put a particular squeeze on lower-income households. Consumers on higher incomes accounted for 71% of spending on organic products in 2011, compared to 67% in 2010. Those in the C2, D and E social groups – which cover manual and casual workers, pensioners, students and people on benefits – accounted for 29% of spend, compared to 33% the previous year.

To add to this, the report states that there has been a 16% growth in organic sales at the two dominate discount retailers in the UK (Lidl and Aldi) and because of this it shows a “...continuing appeal of organic food across the social spectrum” (Soil Association (2012: 6). While this latter point is, I think, a mis-interpretation of what is happening—instead of poorer households buying more organic foods at Lidl and Aldi, it is more middle- and upper-income organically-predisposed shoppers who are shopping at these two stores as the recession has deepened in the UK—that one-third of organic consumers come from lower-income groups is, I think, a firm testament to this supermarketisation of organic food through lower prices, increased access and diversified product lines.

What has happened, to make several wider point here, is that for the majority of organic food consumers, and indeed, ordinary consumers in the UK, there has been a kind of ‘conventionalisation’ of organic food consumption (cf. Buck et al 1997) given that the predominant places we come into contact with organics has shifted into supermarket aisles, check-out counters and online shopping environments over the last decade. This conventionalisation of organic food consumption—facilitated, promoted and constructed by the wider supermarketisation of organic food supplies, sales and cultural politics—means a great deal to any (re)evaluation of the spaces and ethics of organic foods in the UK. First, the spaces of organic food are overwhelmingly and

thoroughly corporatized, global and international, but also still quite local as supermarkets have taken on the tropes of 'local' and 'authentic' into their marketing and self-presentation of organic foods as shown in Johnston et al's (2009) research. The predominant spaces of organic food in the UK then are those controlled and operated by supermarkets which are then, also, the spaces through which the majority of organic foods are sold and purchased and so the prevailing space in which consumers come into contact with organic foods in the UK. Second, again, given the predominance of supermarket involvement in all aspects of the organic food market the ethics of organic foods are perhaps ordinary, diverse and graspable but, as highlighted above, not in the ways or through the processes put forward as generally indicative as seen through the rather narrow lens of Riverford's box scheme. Indeed, and carrying forward my arguments in the chapter, Clarke et al's assumptions about the ethics of organic food from the perspective of the consumer and, principally, consumers' engagements with and co-constructions of the spaces and ethics of organic foods, need to also be further re-evaluated and qualified. I do this now through an engagement with my family's shopping, purchasing, preparation and eating of organic foods. The crucial point here, and one I will return to below and in the conclusion, is that assessments of the spaces and ethics of organic foods must be, *in the first instance*, historicised, situated and contextualised.

Through the Eyes and Words of the Conventionalised Consumer(s): How my Family Practices and Eats in the (Supermarket) Spaces and Ethics of Organic Foods

Aspects of my family's engagements with organic foods resonates with the generalised conclusions about the spaces and ethics of organic foods articulated by Clarke et al but,

to a much greater extent they do not, particularly in the rather simplistic ways they suggest in their paper. Our entanglements with organic foods, such as they are, have shifted over time as our family composition (i.e. one child to two), residential location and tastes have changed and have been shaped by our ability and desire to access and purchase most of our groceries from various supermarkets (Waitrose, Sainsbury's and Aldi) as well as our local, independent farmshop known as Wingroves. And, while writing about our own practices of organic food consumption might be seen as the worst form of self-indulgence or narrowly ideographic, what I want to suggest here is that our experiences and practices probably come closer to those of other organic food consumers and eaters in the UK—albeit those embedded in a white, middle-class lifestyle like ours—than those generalised from Clarke et al's take on the experiences and practices of consumption through their engagements with Riverford. Below, I explore our own spaces of organic foods first, through some general discussion, then get into our ethics of organic foods and parse this into two of the three aspects—ordinary and graspable—that the authors argue as inhabiting and making up the ethics of organic foods and their consumption in the UK.

Tripping the Supermarket Fantastic: Scaling Organic Food Shopping and Consumption

Our spaces of organic food in habit and cross all the scales that UK organic foods inhabit and cross: from the international and national in the form of supermarkets, to the local in that the supermarkets and farmshop we frequent are spatially proximate, to, finally, the domestic space of our home as we order groceries online to have them delivered to our front door. Our organic food spaces are only regional through the regionally labelled foods we purchase, such as the organic lamb from Daylesford farm in Gloucestershire purchased about a month ago that we ate as part of an evening meal.

I assume that the organic milk we drink is also relatively regionally produced given that it is expensive for fresh milk to travel very far and regional milk-sheds are seemingly already well-embedded in the foodscape given the history of milk production in the UK. The truth is with the milk—since it is not regionally labelled and is usually from Rachel’s Organic given that, as my partner puts it, their milk is “cheaper and better tasting” than other brands—I have little idea about its provenance. Nor do we as a family really care all that much about where it comes from, i.e. its spatial relationships to us, as the most important thing about our milk is that it is simply organic as my partner is “grossed out” if we don’t have it and organic milk “tastes better and is of better quality” across the board compared to conventional milk.¹⁴ Our local farmshop milk, while indeed regionally sourced and produced on a farm in Harefield—about a 20 minute drive from us—and certainly very tasty, is not organic so we only buy and drink it when we run out of the organic milk we get from the supermarket.

Our organic food space is one of shared labour, experience and output, all of which has changed over family time and space. Indeed, as we are now in the summer holidays at the time of writing this chapter, most of our organic food space has been that of the home, as we prefer not to have to take the children shopping and so have been having groceries delivered to the house after purchasing them online through Ocodo, the main delivery service for Waitrose, an up-market supermarket chain that is part of the John Lewis retail empire. Online shopping has become part of our routine after the birth of our second child as neither of us had the time and energy to physically go to the supermarket nor virtually any local shop to buy groceries. In general, for me, my own

¹⁴ For us, the environmental-friendliness of organic food forms more of the ‘background noise’ for the reasons for its purchase in that this jostles alongside our concerns about cost, taste, and diet; it is one of the reasons we do buy organic when we can, but is now more a part of our collective sub-conscious given organic mainstreaming and the diversification of organic food products, brands and access.

organic spaces, at least conscious ones, are those of the local supermarket—either Sainsbury's or Aldi as we don't do physical shopping at Waitrose—the farmshop which I do a bit of shopping at on the weekends, or through the labelled products that we buy and use to cook with.

Thus, our spaces of organic foods are dictated and contextualised by how much money we want to spend (do we get an Ocado/Waitrose delivery or do I/we go to Aldi/Sainsbury's in order to save money?), our desire to have good tasting foods for us and the children, the rhythms and routines of the day and work week and the serendipitous shopping that goes along with this, who does and is able to do the shopping as well as cooking, what might need to be restocked and, of course, what we might want for dinner that night. In essence, for us, the spatialised practices and experiences of organic food are quite 'local'—as we shop local and/or buy online—but do indeed materially cross scales as we do most of our shopping at supermarkets that are national, regional and international in the spaces they inhabit and access supplies from. At the same time, these are also very much embodied spaces and so intimate and visceral (e.g. Goodman 2011; Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2010; see also FitzSimmons and Goodman 1998) in relation to concerns of taste, ingestion and cleanliness *vis a vis* foods like conventional milk. Thus, the point here is that our spaces of organic foods are multiple and contextualised in our lifestyle and livelihood socio-economic relations but also distinctly scale- and space-*crossing*—all the way down to our bodies and visceral affects—rather than either distinctly regional or dichotomised into spatial and normative 'containers' of local and authentic versus global and corporate. The spaces of organic foods are importantly not just about scale and place but are also about the other ways that these spaces are constructed and bounded through

family, gender and social relations within our—and others’—family’s daily routines of getting, spending and working.

“We would go broke if we only ate organic foods”: Ordinary Organic Food

Consumption, but for Whom?

Are our ethics in relation to organic foods ‘ordinary’, i.e. about taste, value for money and care within the family, in the sense that the authors refer to the ordinary ethics of organic foods? Unequivocally, the answer for us is a resounded ‘yes’, with value for money leading the way as the quote from my partner opening this section shows, but also very much about care and the visceralities of taste.¹⁵ Indeed, that organic foods are and can be about value for money is a clear testament to their supermarketisation and increased access for more and different eaters. Complicating this, however, our ‘yes’ is mostly for those goods we deem as important to have as organic, such as meat, milk, eggs and yoghurt, rather than *everything* we eat and/or buy. This also goes for items on sale in that we will get organic fruits and vegetables only if they are on sale; the newest online invention in this regard are the ‘flash sales’ that Waitrose/Ocado has that pop up right before one pays for their items and electronically ‘checks out’. Thus, in a way our purchasing and eating of certain food items can become ‘extra-ordinary’ depending on what is on sale, how well Ocado knows our shopping preferences and tastes to recommend us certain items or what Ocado/Waitrose has for sale that day; these ‘flash organics’ have, in some ways, changed what we eat given the importance of bargain shopping for us in the spaces of the current recession. Yet, additionally, as our

household income has shifted over time, the fact that these ordinarily ethical evaluations

¹⁵ We left our own ‘regional’ box scheme and turned to our local supermarkets because of the poor tasting and low quality items in their box, it was very expensive vis a vis supermarkets and we were getting items we simply could not eat as a family given they were so far off of our ‘normal’ palate; more needs to be made of the ‘tacit knowledge’ in relation to box schemes like this, i.e. how do they related to culinary skills, tastes and capabilities? Do they encourage us to expand our food repertoires or close them down, as they did in our case? Many thanks to Colin Sage for these excellent points and questions.

about organic foods have become an established part of our daily decision making has increased; in short, with more money—although we are concerned about saving it as much as possible—there are now, on the whole, more opportunities for organic foods to be more ordinarily ethical for my family. The key here then, again, is the context and situatedness of organic foods in the ways that they enter people’s lives (or don’t) to become ordinarily ethical (or not) based on access, income and family socio-economic status.

This last point leads me into an important question and one fundamental to understanding the spaces and ethics of organic foods. Rather than simply *stating* that the ethics of organic foods are ordinary, I think we need to ask the following more specific and meaningful questions: *For whom* are organic foods ethically ordinary? And through what means do organic foods *become* ordinarily ethical? Put in a different way, for which consumers are organic foods *allowed* to become ethical questions of taste, value for money and the care of the family? Clearly class position is the crucial—if not the determining factor as the Soil Association statistics on who consumes organic foods are to be believed—in terms of this kind of ordinaryisation of the ethics of organic foods.¹⁶ If anything, Bourdieu’s (2005 [1979]) arguments about the importance of understanding ‘taste distinctions’—and the ways that organoleptic tastes are relational to those of class-based ‘tastes’—are exceedingly prescient in the context of organic foods in the UK, although perhaps in need of much more critical socio-economic assessment as the

¹⁶ I want to be clear here though: This is not at all to suggest that those of lower socio-economic classes “...do not know about, care about or engage with moral issues surrounding eating” (Johnston et al 2011: 312) as both Johnston et al’s (2011) and Guthman’s (2003, 2008) work points out in stark, empirical detail. Rather, the point being made here is that middle- and upper-income consumers have more and better opportunities to choose and, thus are able to have these ordinary ethical concerns specifically in the context of organic foods.

organic food market has changed and expanded over time.¹⁷ As he has put it, “it is clear that tastes in food cannot be considered in complete independence of the other dimensions of the relationship to the world, to others and to one’s own body, through which the practical philosophy of each class is enacted” (Bourdieu 2005: 193). So for us, our staid, middle-class-ness—in addition to our visceral concerns over conventional food supplies—translates into the *ability* to choose and *make* organic foods, their shopping and their eating *ordinary*. The ordinary ethics of organic food are completely and utterly relational (e.g. Goodman et al 2010) and indeed, don’t come into being *as ordinary* until they enter into these relationalities with, as the Soil Association report (2012) clearly points out, upper- and middle-income consumers in the UK. The class-loaded nature of this ordinary-isation of organic foods as ordinarily ethical must, at all times, as Johnston et al (2011) point out, be at the forefront of our understandings of the spaces and ethics of organic foods in the UK and elsewhere.

Of Mice and Trolleys: Other/Different Spaces of Organic Food Graspability

Given that we do not subscribe to an organic box delivery scheme, the material graspability of organic food ethics operates in a very different way for us; our graspability of organic foods is most often performed through the mouse, keyboard and computer monitor while also intermittently performed through the shopping trolley in supermarket spaces when we have the time to physically make it to our local supermarket. The graspable ethics of organic foods become material for us when these items are literally ‘grasped’ off the shelves or clicked-on while doing our shopping through and in these very different spaces; there is also now, however, a kind of

¹⁷ For an update on Bourdieu’s ‘Food Space’ that I don’t necessarily agree with—nor have space to get into—but is valuable as an interesting take on organic foods (amongst others), see this blog post by Molly Watson on the *Gastronomica* journal’s website: <http://www.gastronomica.org/bourdieu-food-space/>.

serendipitous graspability that occurs through the ‘flash sales’ on the Ocado/Waitrose website mentioned above.

Once home or delivered to us, these items are put away in the refrigerator or storage shelves, the only reminder they are organic coming on their way to being put away, through a perusal of the store/delivery receipt or when they are taken out to be eaten or cooked into a meal. Graspability of the ethics of organic food is, as also mentioned above, literally non-existent for our two children who are much more concerned with taste, eating and consuming regardless of the provenance of the food in question or in front of them. In short, I am guessing that, like us, for most supermarket organic shoppers, the graspability of the ethics of organic foods are not only fleeting—with much less of the “material and symbolic presence for consumers” that the food box and dirty “hybrid” organic vegetables have (p. 227)—but also requires a kind of ‘renewal’ each time one does the online or trolley shopping without the organic food box turning up automatically on the stoop each week. Moreover, the ordinary-making of the ethics of organic foods through their supermarketisation have completely lowered the ‘tone’ of the material and symbolic presence that the authors have as inhabiting the box and vegetables of Riverford; we hardly know or acknowledge their presence and materiality once in the fridge, put away or on the plate. Thus, for us, rather than the food box, it is the transnational but yet still local (for our shopping anyway) supermarket that “facilitate[s], enable[s] and make[s] possible ethical action” and does so as an “ingrained ... routine practice and performance” (p. 227) as a part of our normal, everyday—and very often slog-like—graspable events and materialities of online and trolley-embedded grocery shopping.

Conclusions

The supermarketisation and ordinary-ification of organic foods in the UK—and, thus, the conventionalisation of their consumption—has had a series of consequences for the spaces and ethics of organic food markets and consumption. Indeed, it is only by contextualising the UK's organic foods market in terms of who the predominant sellers and buyers of organic foods are that we can get a much better view of what these spaces and ethics look like, rather than making a series of assumptions and generalised conclusions about their characteristics from research carried out with one mega organic box seller and no consumers. Situating UK organic food spaces and ethics this way suggests that we cannot talk and generalise about the practices of organic food production, distribution and consumption—and in particular their spatial and ethical make-up—devoid of the political- and socio-economic contexts that they are relational to, operate within and co-construct. In short, that the majority of organic foods are sold through supermarkets and the majority of consumers are of middle- and upper-class socio-economic status matters and matters in important ways to how we understand the spaces and ethics of organic food, and, indeed, how Riverford as a mega box scheme—but a miniscule part of this overall market—fits into and out of these wider spaces and ethics of organic foods in the UK.

Thus, seen through the lens of the supermarketisation of organic foods and by writing my own family's experience as organic food consumers as I have done here, spatially then UK organic foods include every sort of scale from the transnational and global, to the national and regional to the local and micro in the form of people's bodies. In terms of distribution, purchase and consumption, for the majority of consumers who buy their organic foods at supermarkets, the spaces of organic are not only local and/or of the home through online grocery shopping and delivery, but tied

very much into the transnational and global spaces of capital and supply chains for organic foods. Ethically, as also seen through these two lenses, organic foods take on much different characteristics and/or make-up than those proposed by Clarke et al: the ordinary ethics of organics are, fundamentally, those of profit and competition for supermarkets which effect farmers and suppliers in important ways, and speaking as a consumer through myself and my family, the ordinary ethics of organic foods are about taste, value for money and care within the family but in selective and serendipitous ways that beg questions about the class-embedded status of this ordinarily ethical nature of organic foods. The diversity of the ethics of organic foods, as argued by the authors is, I would argue, on the wane. Instead, given the predominance of supermarkets in organic food markets and the values of profit generation rather than those of food democracy, sustainability and fairness—although as Johnston et al (2009) point out, this is being quickly enrolled into supermarket organic narratives to further expand value-generating possibilities—seem to rule the day. Finally, that the ethics of organic food are materially graspable might be true in the Riverford box scheme, but are very much differently enacted and performed by the majority of consumers, my family included, given that our graspability of the ethics of organic food are much more fleeting and tangential as we either do our shopping at the supermarket itself or online. The predominance and the power of the transgressions of supermarkets into the market, supply chains, marketing and consumption of organic foods not only makes the spaces and ethics of organic foods in the UK “more complex” as Clarke et al (p. 228) put it (rather obviously) in their conclusion reflecting on Riverford’s box scheme, but does so in a way that greatly affects these spaces and ethics in far-reaching and crucial ways.

But where to go from here? Future research, in my opinion, should focus on more, at both the wider political economic level but also that of the micro and ethnographic, of what this mainstreaming of organic foods has wrought in the UK. Much more work needs to be done on the impacts all of this is having on organic farming and farmers, but also more fully on people's engagements with organic foods as eaters, members of families, communities and wider societies. Indeed, how is this supermarketisation and corporatisation of organic foods impacting the wider politics of organic foods and the organic foods movements? Is this now the end game for many or is there more to come: Organic foods are now widely available at supermarkets and relatively affordable, or at least much more so than in the past, and so all we need to do is expand supply and develop more demand in order to further expand access? How and in what ways have supermarkets developed and controlled the debate about organic food production and consumption and indeed sustainable food supplies more broadly? If they are now the leading voices for food democracy, but ones controlled and made profitable by and for them, where and what are the Other voices for food democracy, sovereignty and security, and how are these being articulated? And, indeed, perhaps a bit more *norm*-isation—something Clarke et al are loathe to do with respect to organic food politics—is in order in the context of the multitudinous and multi-faceted food crises facing and predicted to face many now and in the near future.

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